

Pathways to Bilingualism: Young Children's Home Experiences Learning English and Spanish

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Abstract

Nowadays, more and more young children in the United States have the experience of speaking a language other than English at home, and many parents choose to educate their children bilingually. This study explored the home-language experiences, in English and Spanish, of three young Latino girls ages 15 months, 16 months, and 30 months, respectively, when the study began. They were observed at home between 40 and 70 hours for 30 months. Three questions guided the study: (1) What languages are used at home and for what purposes? (2) Who addresses the participant children in English and Spanish? and (3) How do the participants express themselves in English and Spanish? The data suggest that the three participants received input in English and Spanish based on the bilingual characteristics of the families. However, as they grew older and their proficiency in English improved, the input in Spanish diminished, as well as their ability to speak Spanish. At the end of the study, the three participants understood English and Spanish, one spoke English and Spanish when prompted, one spoke only in English, and another one spoke in both languages without being prompted. This study suggests that raising children bilingually may require support of the minority language outside the home, with collaboration among the schools, the families, and the community.

Introduction

Despite being a nation made up of immigrants coming from many different countries and speaking many different languages, American society has not supported or encouraged bilingualism (Crawford, 1999). However, early childhood organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Office of Head Start have long advocated for early childhood programs and teachers that respect, value, and support young children's native languages (NAEYC, 1995). Recently, the Office of Head Start (2008) in the *Dual Language Report* pointed out that educating young children whose primary language is not English requires embedding the connection among language, culture, and learning needs into all aspects of a Head Start program (p. 6). The report concludes that Head Start programs should promote the native language of the young child because "ultimately, effective program support for promoting dual language acquisition in children will result in more children eager to learn in Head Start as well as more children being prepared to begin school ready and eager to *continue* learning—an investment well worth making" (p. 4).

Many mainstream families, in general, and immigrant families, in particular, agree with this position and express strong interest in raising their children bilingually for a variety of reasons. Many families believe that children who are bilingual will be able to communicate with parents and other family members who do not speak English; they will benefit from the cognitive, academic, and social advantages of being bilingual; and they will also have improved employment prospects. In addition, families expect that by raising their children bilingually, they can maintain the family's heritage language and culture (Bialystok, 2001; King & Mackey, 2007; Yoshida, 2008).

Research on bilingual development in early childhood addresses (1) the language development of children in two or more languages and its relation to their cognitive and sociocultural development (Bialystok, 2001; Yoshida, 2008) and (2) the role of the home, the community, and society in educating children bilingually. Given the importance of the social context in language development, more research is needed to uncover the diverse linguistic input that young children receive from the various social networks that they are in contact with, for example, the immediate and extended family, friends, neighbors, and caregivers (Hamers & Blanc, 1995). The purpose of this study was to explore the different ways in which three young girls learned English and Spanish during their early childhood years.

The study was guided by Vygotsky's theory of human development, which highlights the essential role of social interactions in culturally specific contexts in the development of language (Vygotsky, 1978). Language socialization research across cultures conducted by Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) confirmed long ago the importance of interactions in socializing young children into language—and through a specific language into a culture. More recently, neuroscience research using the tools of modern technology revealed the strategies that babies use to learn language(s), which include pattern perception, computational skills, and social interaction, which “plays a more significant role in early language learning than previously thought, at least in natural language-learning situations” (Kuhl & Rivera-Gaxiola, 2008, p. 518). In fact, babies learned words and phonemes in a foreign language only when exposed to the language through book reading and play with native speakers, but they did not learn the language when exposed to the same sounds and words through television or audio-only tutors.

Methodology

This study addressed the following questions: (1) What languages are used at home and for what purposes? (2) Who addresses the participant children in English and Spanish? and (3) How do the participants express themselves in English and Spanish?

Three families were recruited who expressed interest in raising their children bilingually and had children between 15 months and 3 years of age. The researcher knew one of the families from a previous study and met the other two families through a friend and in a doctor's office.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Data collection involved participant observation, audiotapings, informal conversations, and interviews with all family members. For the purpose of this paper, only the fieldwork notes, audiotapings of the focus children, and informal conversation with the family members were analyzed. The home visits were scheduled after calling the family to decide on a convenient time for the family and the researcher. At the beginning of the study, two of the participants only spoke a few words each, and most observations were audiotaped and complemented by the researcher's notes.

The data analysis was performed in three phases. The first phase involved typing the field notes and the transcripts of all recorded tapes made during participant observation. Next, data were highlighted for each participant using the research questions as the initial categories, namely: (1) input provided in English and in Spanish, (2) the source of the input, and (3) participants' expressive language in English and Spanish. Subsequent readings of the notes and transcripts led to preparing charts to record all the data related to each of the categories for each of the participants. In the third phase, the focus shifted to analyzing the data in order “to make sense of what is going on” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 10). This analysis involved identifying patterns of interactions between the family members and each participant, similarities and differences in patterns of interactions among participants (with particular attention to changes occurring over time), and “key factors and relationships among them” (p. 10) that contributed to the understanding of the data.

Participant Families and Children's Characteristics

At the beginning of the study, the three participants—Josefina Cortés, Kayla Jiménez, and Thais Velázquez (pseudonyms chosen by the families)—were 16 months old, 15 months old, and 30 months old, respectively. Josefina lived with her mother, father, and her 11-year-old brother. Josefina's parents were born in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the United States when they were in their teens. Josefina and her brother were born in New York City. Josefina's mother was fluent in Spanish and understood and spoke some English; her brother and father were bilingual. Mr. Cortés holds a bachelor's degree, but his work is not connected to the degree. Mrs. Cortés has a high school diploma and works as a home attendant. Josefina was observed at home for about 40 hours over a period of 30 months. At the beginning of the study, for about 6 months, I observed Josefina in the morning, when she was at home with her mother. For the last 2 years of the study, I observed her in the afternoon or on Sunday mornings when all the family members were at home, and occasionally I

observed her with other family members, like Josefina's maternal grandfather, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Kayla's family included her mother and father and her 4-year-old sister. Kayla's mother was born in New York City from Dominican and Puerto Rican parents. Her father was born on a Caribbean island and immigrated to the United States when he was a teenager. Kayla's mother and sister spoke both English and Spanish; the father spoke English. Mr. and Mrs. Jiménez hold bachelor's degrees and worked in education. Since Kayla was 10 months old, she had spent about 8 hours a day, 4 days a week, with her great-grandmother, who talked to her in Spanish, although she understood and spoke some English. During the last 10 months of the study, the family lived with the great-grandmother. Kayla was observed in the morning and early afternoon for about 50 hours over a period of 30 months, mostly but not exclusively in her great-grandmother's home and in her great-grandmother's presence. Occasionally, Kayla's mother, sister, and father were also at home, as well as cousins, grandparents, and aunts.

Thais lived with her mother and two teenage brothers. Mrs. Velázquez was born in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to New York City when she was 18. Mrs. Velázquez finished the 11th grade. She worked as part of the welfare program. Mrs. Velázquez's three children were born in New York City. Thais's mother spoke Spanish and understood some English. Thais's brothers were fluent in English and Spanish. Thais was observed at home once a month over several months, totaling about 70 hours. I observed Thais in the early afternoon when her mother and sometimes her brothers were home. On a few occasions, other family members, such as the maternal grandmother and cousins, and family friends were present.

Language Used at Home—*with* Each of the Participant Children and *by* Each of the Children

Each family expressed interest in educating the youngest members of the family bilingually. Also, in all families, the oldest siblings and at least one member of the family were bilingual. But the language of everyday conversation at home was dictated by the native language of the parents. In addition, attending or not attending child care before or at 3 years of age had an impact on the focus children's language development in two languages.

Josefina Cortés's Language Input

In the Cortés's home, Josefina's input at home was mostly in Spanish until she was about 3 years of age. Conversation at home between the three members of the family and the researcher was always in Spanish, and according to the parents, it reflected what was going on at home on a daily basis even when the immediate family was with other family members, who were also Spanish speakers, on weekends. Josefina watched TV in Spanish with her mother—for example, a soap opera that Mrs. Cortés watched when she had time in the evening. Also, during Josefina's first two years, she spent time each year in the Dominican Republic (about a month) with her Spanish-speaking family. Since the age of 2 until 2½ years, she attended, for about 5 hours a day, a family child care program where she was addressed in Spanish.

During this time, Josefina also received input in English at home. At age 16 months and until she was 2 years of age, she watched approximately 3 hours of TV cartoons in English, often alone and at times with her family. English was also used at home to teach Josefina numbers, letters, greetings (*hello, bye bye*), and manners (*thank you*). Some words in English such as *Pampers, yummy, yes, hi, oh man, and I love you* were often used when the conversation was in Spanish. At 2½ years of age, Josefina attended a different child care program for at least 8 hours a day, and, at her mother's request, she was addressed in English. Also, when Josefina initiated conversations in English, which started at age 3 years 4 months, the tendency was for her father, at times, and especially her brother, to respond in the same language.

Josefina Cortés's Use of Two Languages

Josefina's use of each language went from initiating her interactions exclusively in Spanish to using English almost exclusively, even when she was addressed in Spanish. At 16 months, Josefina spoke a few words in Spanish: *papí* (dad), *mami* (mom), *pipí*, (pee), *Etete* (name that she gave to her brother), and in English: *hi* and *hello*. She also tried to *talk* by saying *ei, ei*, and then when anybody in the room paid attention to her, she would make unintelligible noises with the intonation of asking a question or making a statement. She was also able to repeat words in English (e.g., *oh man, thank you, yummy, Pampers*) and Spanish (*mimí* for *dormir* (sleep), *mua, mua* for *un beso* (a kiss), and *qué lindo!* (how nice), but she did not use these words on her own.

At 2 years of age, she had added several words to her vocabulary in Spanish—*hola* (hello), *jugó* (juice), *io* for *sucio* (dirty), *chichí* (baby), *pan* (bread), *sopa* (soup), *vamos* (let's go), *mimí* for *dormir* (sleep), *leche* (milk), and *qué lindo!* (how nice). She now called her brother *Tete* and used a sentence in Spanish—"Qué te cae!" [*sic*] (You are going to fall down)—and would tell her father, "Papa bye, bye." She also used English, for some numbers, and she could say *oh man, thank you, Pampers*, and *I love you*. Until Josefina was 3 years and 4 months of age, she continued adding vocabulary in Spanish and English, but she initiated the conversation in Spanish and used some sentences in English such as "What is this?"; "Open your mouth"; "Oh my God!"; "Give me"; "I did it"; and "Let's go"; and she sang some songs like "Happy Birthday."

The shift to initiating interactions more often in English than in Spanish was clear when I arrived for one of my last visits. Josefina's mother was not yet at home, and Josefina said to me at the door, "Mommy is coming soon." Mr. Cortés noticed this change and told me with surprise, "Ella habla más inglés por el day care, porque allí todo es en inglés. Aquí su madre le habla en español y yo también pero éste (por su hijo) no." (She speaks more English because in the day care, everything is in English. Here [at home] her mother talks to her in Spanish and me too, but her brother does not speak to her in Spanish.) Josefina's next phase was to answer in English questions asked of her in Spanish or to continue a conversation in English that was initiated in Spanish. Josefina's father described the new situation and told me, "Su mamá y yo que le hablamos en español pero ella contesta en inglés. Josefina no quiere hablar español y yo le digo que se lo voy a decir a Victoria." (Josefina's mother and I talk to her in Spanish, but she answers in English. Josefina does not want to speak Spanish, and I tell her that I am going to tell Victoria [the researcher].)

When she was 3 years 8 months old, I was reading aloud a story in Spanish about a little mouse. I asked her questions about the pictures, and she spontaneously volunteered some comments. This is the conversation in Spanish:

R: ¿Dónde tiene los dientes ella? (Where are her teeth?)

J: En la mouth. (In her mouth.)

R: ¿Dónde está el rabito? (Where is her tail?)

J: Right there.

While I am reading, she says on her own "got eyes."

R: Sí tiene ojos ahí, sí y ¿qué más tiene? (Yes, she has eyes there, and what else does she have?)

She says something that I can't hear.

R: Sí tiene una boca y ¿qué más tiene? (Yes, she has a mouth there, and what else does she have?)

J: Mouth.

R: ¿Qué es eso? (What is that?)

J: Mouth.

R: Esa es la nariz. (That is the nose.)

I continue reading in Spanish, and Josefina volunteers "is a house."

At the beginning of the study, Josefina, age 16 months, initiated interactions and expressed her wants and needs using one-word utterances in Spanish. She also used some words in English. At the end of the study, at age 3 years 10 months, Josefina understood English and Spanish. But she initiated interactions more often in English than in Spanish, and she would usually respond in English to questions or conversations initiated in Spanish. She also stated some letters, shapes, and most colors in English and some numbers in English and in Spanish, and she sang songs such as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," the "ABC Song," and "The Wheels on the Bus."

Kayla Jiménez's Language Input

For Kayla, the main linguistic input at home was in English. Kayla's mother, father, and older sister were fluent in English, and English was the language of daily interaction and communication. However, Kayla also received daily input in Spanish. Kayla was cared for by her great-grandmother, who, especially at the beginning of the study, always addressed Kayla in Spanish. Conversation between Kayla's great-grandmother and the researcher, by the way, was always in Spanish—the language her great-grandmother was more comfortable with. Also during the visits, the TV set in the living room was always on Spanish-language channels. When Kayla wanted to watch TV, she would ask her great-grandmother to turn on the TV in her bedroom, and she would watch cartoons in English. But she watched her favorite cartoon *Dora the Explorer* in Spanish every Saturday. Also Kayla's mother and sister addressed her sometimes in Spanish. For example, Mrs. Jiménez stated that she always reprimanded and comforted her daughters in Spanish. Kayla's sister was more reluctant to talk to her in Spanish because she did not understand why she had to talk to her sister in Spanish if Kayla spoke English. But she would address her great-grandmother in Spanish, especially if the great-grandmother did not understand her in English. In addition, at age 3, Kayla started attending child care where, at her mother's request, one of the caregivers taught her the numbers, colors, and shapes in Spanish.

The input in Spanish provided by Kayla's great-grandmother somewhat decreased as Kayla started using more English than Spanish. She had a tendency to use the words that she knew in English to make sure that Kayla understood her. Yet, most of the input that Kayla received in Spanish was from her great-grandmother. I made an effort to try to talk to Kayla in Spanish, but it was difficult to always answer in Spanish when Kayla expressed her wants and needs always in English.

Kayla Jiménez's Use of Language

During the first 7 months that I observed Kayla, when she was between 15 and 22 months of age, she used words in English and Spanish—but more in Spanish than in English. Words in Spanish included *ela* or *bela* for *abuela* (grandmother), *mama* (mommy), *linda* (beautiful), *aquí* (here), *nada* (nothing), *mimí* for *dormir* (sleep), *agua* (water), *más* (more). In English, she said *daddy*, *nice*, *jush* for *juice*, *eat*, *no more*, and *my friend*. After 22 months of age, Kayla started using two-word sentences in English, and her English improved in terms of the use of new words and longer sentences. At age 22 months until age 30 months, she continued using a few words in Spanish such as *bela* or *buela* for *abuela* (grandmother), *titi* (auntie), *pan* (bread), *de nada* (you're welcome). After 30 months of age, Kayla did not use words in Spanish while the researcher was visiting. By that time, she systematically continued a conversation in English that was initiated in Spanish. At age 3 years 4 months, Kayla understood English and Spanish but basically spoke English and a few words in Spanish. Kayla's mom compared Kayla's proficiency in Spanish with her sister's and stated that, when Kayla was addressed in Spanish, she would always answer in English. Her sister, however, would answer in the language in which she was addressed, Spanish included, especially if she knew that her interlocutor did not speak English.

Thais Velázquez's Language Input

At the onset of the study, Spanish was the language used in Thais's home to communicate; Mrs. Velázquez spoke only Spanish, and her older children were fluent in it, too. The TV set in Mrs. Velázquez bedroom, where Thais slept and spent many hours, was always on Spanish-language channels. Thais's siblings talked to each other more often in English than in Spanish; music and TV in their bedroom was always in English, but they always addressed their sister in Spanish until Thais

turned 3½. Thais was also in contact with other family members such as uncles, aunts, and cousins, as well as friends who always addressed her in Spanish.

Thais also received input in English. From the time she was 2 until she was 3½, she was cared for by her mother. Thais watched *Barney*, her favorite TV show, in English every morning. She was observed watching Barney videos over and over again. She also enjoyed the cartoons *Tom and Jerry*, *Scooby-doo*, and occasionally *Power Rangers* and *Sponge Bob Square Pants*.

When Thais was about 3½ years old, her mother started working and tried to enroll her in a prekindergarten class. Thais was not admitted because no spaces were available, and she was cared for by several babysitters who addressed her in Spanish and by a family friend. The friend's three grandchildren—a 4-year-old girl and twin 8-year-old boys—addressed her in English. Thais spoke Spanish with the babysitter but played in English with the children, especially the 4-year-old girl. She also watched cartoons, *Dora the Explorer*, and *Franklin*.

Also, Thais's older brother told the researcher that he had started talking to her in English and Spanish to get her ready for school because, according to him, "Now most parents talk to their kids in English so if she [Thais] goes to school only speaking Spanish she is like an outcast."

Thais Velázquez's Use of Language

At the beginning of the study when Thais was 2 years 6 months, she always expressed her wants and needs in Spanish. She tried very hard to involve the researcher and her brothers in playing ball and in hide and seek, her favorite games. She screamed "Dame la bola" (Give me the ball) when she was not getting the ball as fast as she wanted and encouraged the player to send it back to her saying *pújalo* instead of *empújala* (push it). She showed her toys with pride—"Mira lo que yo tengo" (Look at what I have) and was eager to show that she could ride the tricycle saying "¿Tú quieres que yo monte mi bicicleta?" (Do you want me to ride my bicycle?). She watched soap operas in Spanish and asked questions about the show such as "¿Verdad que Tony Montán está muerto?" (Is it truth that Tony Montan died?) or stated, "Acabó Juan José" (Juan José is over) meaning that the soap opera was over. Thais also showed interest in shows in English and asked her brother to change the channel to *Scooby-doo* saying, "Yo quiero Scooby-doo" (I want *Scooby-doo*). She also was observed at 2 years 8 months saying *thank you* when she was given something.

At 3 years of age, Thais was really confident in her ability to speak Spanish to the point that she tried to correct the researcher. I asked her, "¿Tu no tienes calor así vestida?" (Aren't you warm dressed like that?) And she told me, "Eso no se llama vestido se llama falda" (That is not called a dress, that is called skirt.) She did not know that *vestida* means dressed and heard *vestido* (dress) instead. Between 3 years and 3 years and 6 months, Thais continued speaking mostly Spanish, and according to her mother, she was not really talkative until she was 3 years of age. She spoke Spanish well except for some words like *bochando* for *abrochando* (to button up), *bibirón* for *biberón* (baby's bottle), *estógamo* instead of *estómago* (stomach), and she made mistakes such as "Mami me poní chancletas" instead of "Mamá me puse chancletas" (Mom, I put on my slippers) and *dicio* instead of *dijo* (he/she said).

From 3 years 6 months to 4 years of age, Thais was a fluent speaker of Spanish with the typical mispronunciation of certain words, "Yo tengo una bahía" instead of "Yo tengo una herida" (I have a wound) and grammatical errors such as "Anoche tu vas a venir" (Last night you will come) instead of "Mañana tu vas a venir" (You will come tomorrow).

She was also aware that she spoke Spanish and of the phonological differences between the Spanish that the researcher spoke and the Spanish that she spoke. For example the researcher said to her that Dora, the main character in *Dora the Explorer*, spoke Spanish, and Thais said, "Yo también" (Me too). Thais was having lunch and said that the food had *sasón* (seasoning); the researcher said *sazón* (using a *th* pronunciation for the *z*), and Thais said *no, sasón*.

During this time, she added several words to her vocabulary in English. She often used *please*, *sleep*, *closet*, *I am sorry*, *yellow*, *you're welcome*, *bye bye*, and *ice cream*, which she pronounced *ice quis*.

She also sang two songs: "Happy Birthday" and "I Love You."

At 4 years of age, Thais used sentences such as "What are you doing?"; "You can't see me I can't see you"; "Stop talking to me, funny"; "What hand is the ball in?"; "Look, look I fly." She continued playing hide and seek but in English.

It was difficult for the researcher to evaluate Thais's proficiency in English because she always interacted in Spanish. However, by the time that Thais was 4 years 6 months old, according to her mother, "Thais ahora habla en español y en inglés" (Thais now speaks Spanish and English). Also Thais passed the English test administered by the New York City Department of Education and was placed in a monolingual English kindergarten class at age 5. Thais's mother told me that Thais spoke English when she was enrolled in kindergarten because of her interaction with the babysitter's grandchildren more than for what she had learned with her brothers. This experience contributed to her ability to pass the English test of the New York City Department of Education.

Discussion

This study revealed some strategies used to promote bilingualism in the homes of young children, how these strategies were implemented, and the kind of exposure to two languages that these children had when they attended school. However, the results cannot be generalized to all young Latino children being educated bilingually because of the small number of participants and how they were selected and because the participants were all female and the youngest in their families.

Each family had a different pattern of language use at home, dictated, in part, by the linguistic characteristics of each of the members of the family, especially the mother and father. During the first two years of life, Josefina and Thais were addressed in Spanish almost exclusively because that was the language that the parents spoke the most competently. In contrast, although Kayla's mother and sister were bilingual, she received most of her input in English because her father did not speak Spanish. However, during the first two years of life, Josefina and Thais received some input in English and Kayla received some input in Spanish. Josefina and Thais were exposed to English through watching cartoons on TV and also through speaking with their siblings, who spoke English. Kayla's exposure to Spanish came through her great-grandmother, who took care of her and spoke mostly Spanish to her.

The data, however, suggest that as the three participants grew older and their proficiency in English improved, the input provided to two of the participants in Spanish diminished and so did the opportunity to become balanced bilinguals. At the end of the study, the three participants understood English and Spanish. Josefina spoke English and Spanish only when prompted, Kayla spoke only English, and Thais was fluent in both languages.

The results of this study suggest that in order to raise bilingual children, families need to make sure that the children receive adequate exposure to each of the languages. Speaking the minority language at home may not be enough, not only because when children start going to school or to child care the time at home decreases, but also because once children learn English, they are more motivated to speak the majority language than the minority language. Therefore, in order to raise children bilingually, the minority language may have to be supported outside the home, for example, in the community and in the schools (Genesee, 2008).

The ideal learning situation would be to enroll the child in a dual-language program. The lack of early childhood bilingual programs underscores the cultural and political climate of our country regarding bilingualism and may explain, in part, the academic difficulties of school-age English language learners who are not given the support and time to learn two languages (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009; Garcia & Scribner, 2009). Bilingualism in early childhood, however, can be supported in programs that, as recommended by the NAEYC (1995), respect and value minority languages and cultures. Early childhood programs can show that they respect and value the native language of young children by implementing a number of strategies:

- Addressing the negative attitudes that personnel may have about minority languages, given society's misunderstandings regarding bilingualism.
- Informing parents and teachers about the advantages of bilingualism and the challenges of becoming bilingual.
- Encouraging parents, siblings, and extended family to speak the native language at home.
- Providing materials such as books, music, and videos in the different languages.
- Hiring personnel who speak English and the minority languages represented in the center.
- Using the minority languages not only to translate when parents do not speak English but also in the classroom.
- Providing parents and teachers with knowledge about first- and second-language acquisition and the time most children need to attain academic proficiency in English.
- Making teachers and parents aware of what research has shown regarding how proficiency in one's native language supports English language learning.

Parents who express interest in their children being bilingual may not be aware of the challenges that the children face in order to maintain two languages. This study suggests that parents need to be made aware of the challenges that they face if they want their children to be proficient in two languages, as well as ways of addressing the challenges at home, in school, and in the community (Rodríguez, 2008).

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